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## CAIRENE FURNITURE.

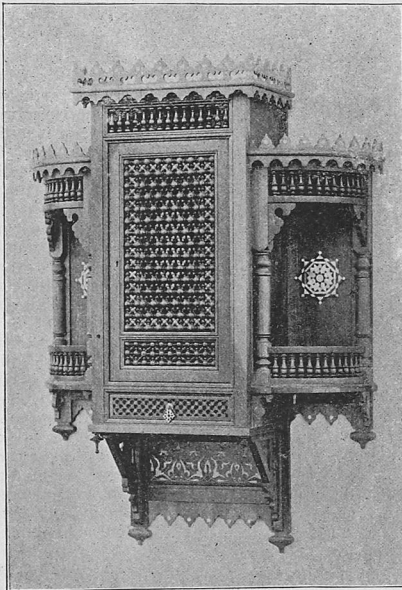
By LAURA B. STARR.

Cairo, Egypt.



THE ornamental spindle work, called by the natives "mouchrebea," is the most ornamental thing about both public and private dwellings in old Cairo and the native quarter of the newer city. It is used lavishly for both interiors and exteriors, and is most effective wherever found. The very finest specimens are found in the mosques and on some of the old tumble-down houses that have seen their best days.

In one of the old streets there is a whole block of mouchrebea work, now gray with age and dust, which is the admiration of all who look upon it. There is an innumerable variety of spindles and designs, far more than



CAIRENE WALL CABINET.

might be imagined from the few specimens exported to the West as the fewer still that are manufactured there. The fronts of the houses are entirely covered with the work, the regularity of the surface being broken by arches, balconies, overhanging windows, panels, and tiny roofed porticoes little larger than port-holes. It is a beautiful specimen of the olden architecture and decoration, but it grieves the artistic soul that it should be allowed to decay as it is doing.

Almost invariably the little overhanging triangular and rectangular windows, through which the women of the harem view the passing panorama of the street, are made of mouchrebea work; the exceptions are the windows of the very poorest class of houses, those which are only one grade above the mud huts of the fellaheen; in these houses the windows are guarded by plain wooden lattice made of strips like lath.

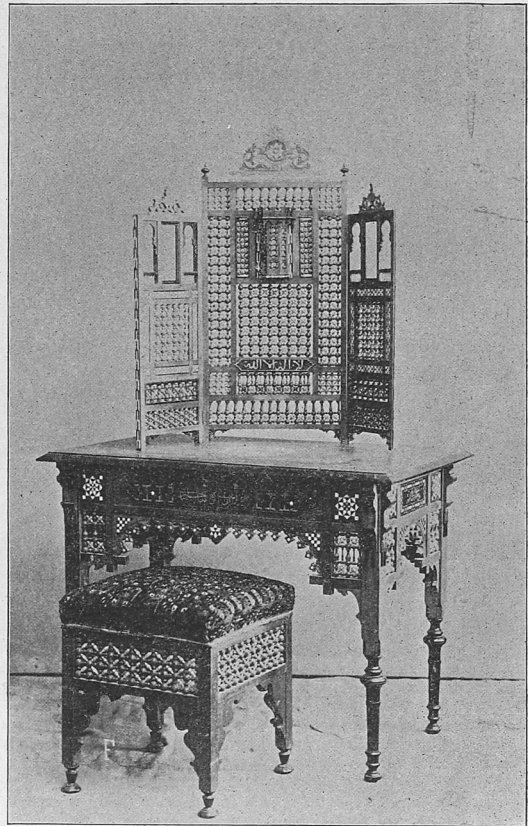
Ornamental gateways, which give entrance into the court around which many of the houses are built—are often decorated with the same work, squares of it alternating with wood or stone carving. In some cases the exteriors facing the court are covered with mouchrebea, or perhaps but only of the main body of the house will be decorated. Again, a very handsome house internally will have a perfectly plain exterior; the amount is varied according to the wealth and taste of the owner.

In the house of the Cheik-El-Sadatt, a direct descendant of the Prophet, which I visited the other day, there was a great variety of the work both inside and out. As we entered the courtyard there was a little mosque, or praying place, at the right; the front of this was not inclosed except by a deep dado of mouchrebea, and a very ornamental frieze of the same. The winding stairs which lead to the pulpit were decorated with larger spindles, and there is more or less of it let into the wall in various places.

Mouchrebea work has manifold uses in the interior arrangements of all houses; the apartment of the women are quite separate from those of the men and apparently from the general living rooms. In the few that I have seen there is a beautiful latticed balcony let into these rooms from the harem, and here the women folk may sit and look upon the general visitor and even listen to his conversation without being seen. These lattices are exquisitely wrought in lace-like designs and are very ornamental.

Every Egyptian house has innumerable cupboards, all the doors of which are made of this work; certain ones hold the household china, another special coffee sets, others linens and wearing apparel. The ancients had few chests of drawers, so they utilized inclosures in the thick walls of their houses for this purpose, and made them decorative by mouchrebea work.

Some ceilings have alternate squares of spindles and carved work; there is nearly always a frieze or dado of mouchrebea and sometimes both, again panels of it divide the great wall



OTTOMAN, TABLE AND SCREEN DECORATED WITH MOUCHREBEA WORK.

spaces, and an arch of it is often seen dividing the length of a large room.

Long lines of spindles are let into the backs of the stationary divans which are built along all the sides of a room and mouch-

rebea divides the honor with an elaborate inlay of mother-of-pearl or colored wood in all furniture decoration. The turners' best work is put upon the Koran stands, which are more or less elaborate, according to the wealth of the owner.

The ottomans, dressing tables and other pieces of furniture seen in the old houses, I mean such furniture as was used by the natives before the wholesale introduction of European furniture and decoration, are all marvels of fine workmanship, elaborate with various kinds of inlaid work and mouchrebea. The latter is made of several kinds of wood found here, but much of the finest is made of the wood of the lemon and orange tree, portions of which are painted black to represent ebony.

The furniture found at present in both European houses and those of wealthy natives is made more or less after French designs; that is, the general outlines, but all the decorations are mouchrebea inlay, interspersed with quotations from the Koran, delicately carved, thus preserving a certain local coloring. To my mind the foreign resident makes a mistake who introduces a new article of European furniture into his house, save such as are absolutely necessary for the comfort and health of the family. There is a wealth of native products, beautifully artistic, which can with a little ingenuity be adapted to the needs of the present day, and what more delightful than a room or a house filled with the essence and flavor of modern Egyptian art.

In the Ghezireh Palace Hotel, one of the twenty-nine famous palaces built by Ismael Pasha during his extravagant reign, there is a bookcase resplendent with carving, inlay of wood and pearl, and mouchrebea work. It is one of the finest pieces of work ever turned out by native artists. It closely resembles the illustration given, but is far more elaborate in detail and has carefully chosen texts from the Koran. Each little alcove has a door and inscription, the latter corresponding to the kind of books which were to be kept within, the center one being reserved for the Koran.

The native is as anxious to use foreign furniture as the European is to possess as much and as many as he may of Egyptian art and articles. The wealthy natives who live in Cairo or Alexandria, in their haste to become civilized and to be one with the nations of the earth, discard the old and adopt the new, regardless of the use or abuse of either. I visited the Khedival Palace in Alexandria, and to my amazement I

found not one thing to remind me that I was in Egypt; the trail of French art and artisan is over it all, and the result is disappointing, not that I object to French art in itself, but a French picture set in an Egyptian frame is incongruous, to say the least. The divans, which in many of the rooms were built in with the woodwork, are the only concession made to native custom, but these are as high as chairs, modified to suit modern taste.

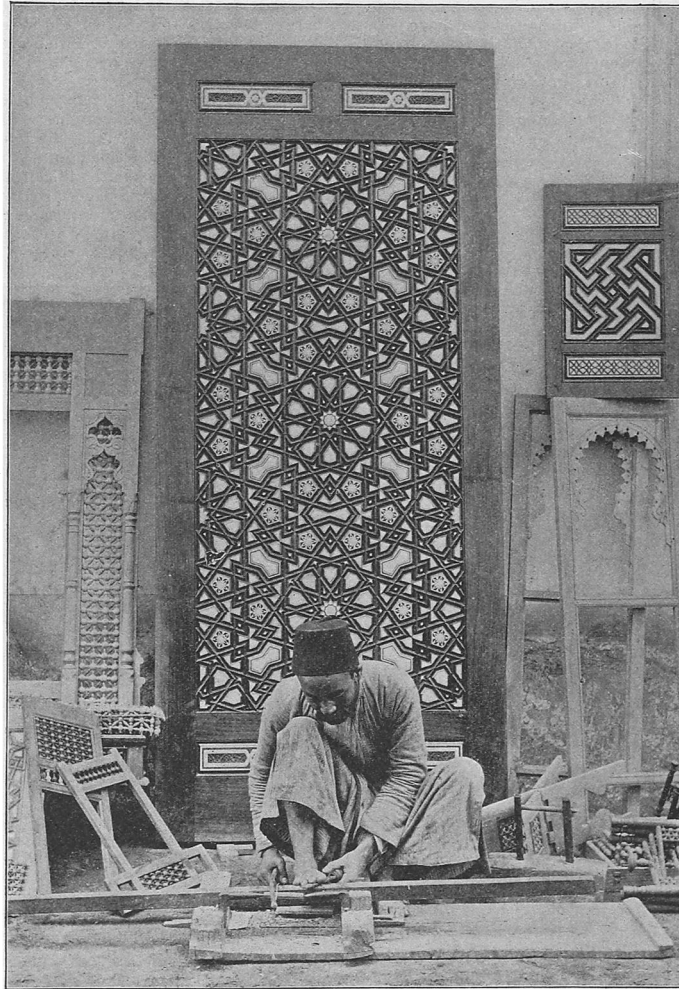
The mouchrebea artist of to-day turns out whole sets of bedroom and drawing-room furniture made of beautiful spindles; some of their designs are very fine; but even if they were not the decoration would make them works of art.

There is an infinite variety of screens, large and small, ranging in price from \$10 to \$250. The most characteristic one is the miniature front of an old house with the little balcony or window let into the center panel. Within this inclosure the women of the harem used to keep their embroidery, toilet articles, etc. Sometimes a triangular window is let into one of the outer folds of the screen, or little flat doors with quaint metal clasps. Again, shelves are arranged across the angle of two leaves, thus furnishing a place for coffee cup or vase of flowers. The dados of the screens are nearly always finished with solid inlay done in geometrical patterns. The top of the little balcony forms a bracket for statuary or lamp. I have given only a general description of screens; to give the details in minutiae would require a whole number of THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER, so many are there and so elaborate.

There is also a great variety of wall brackets, cupboards, pedestals and the little, low, octagonal tables, which the native uses as coffee stands, and the more modern for afternoon tea, as well as taller, light stands which are used for the same purpose, photograph and picture frames, all of which

are decorated more or less with mouchrebea work.

The spindles are all turned by hand, with the most primitive machinery. The turner holds in his right hand something which looks like a loosely strung bow, the cord of which has been twisted around the little piece of wood which is to be turned, and his right foot and left hand hold the chisel which cuts and forms the curves. Practice makes him a very rapid and most dexterous workman. I have spent hours watching the workmen and am never weary; the worker and his works are most fascinating.



INLAIED DOOR. THE WORKMAN IN ILLUSTRATION IS ENGAGED IN PRODUCING MOUCHREBEA WORK ON THE PRIMITIVE ORIENTAL LATHE.